

**A RECLAMATION OF SELF AND SOCIETY: COMPLEMENTARIANISM
AND THE GAZE IN JANE AUSTEN'S *PERSUASION***

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by

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ABSTRACT

A Reclamation of Self and Society: Complementarianism and the Gaze in Jane Austen's
Persuasion

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This analysis follows Jane Austen's exploration of womanhood and autonomy within her last completed novel, *Persuasion*. It investigates her commentary on the feminine experience under the rigid traditionalism of the Regency era. Although this morally conscious era placed significant pressure on both sexes to regulate their appearances, women faced additional pressures. They worked to oppose the ideals of the post-Edenic woman present in many conduct manuals. This fallen and wanton woman catalyzed a phallic fear of the immoral woman in a patriarchal society. Additionally, women's bodies needed to be seen and evaluated for marriageability and to fulfill their function as extenders of the family legacy. This analysis borrows from contemporary film theorist Laura Mulvey, who conceptualized these ideas as the "male gaze." Mulvey's conceptualization of the "male gaze" identifies the objectification of women within modern film theory and its representative society as the securing and exaltation of male superiority and pleasure. Although Austen did not have access to this term during her time, I argue that she has access to the concept through her lived experience in the Regency era.

Through her heroine in *Persuasion*, Jane Austen explores the relationship between the female body and the gaze to confront hyper-traditionalism and the passive womanhood it prescribes. While previous scholars apply the term "male gaze" to the Austen canon, this research extends such scholarship by introducing an independent authority, the female gaze. Rather than evaluating the body as an object to be looked at, desired, and commodified, the female gaze investigates the significance of all that lies beneath its surface. By looking at the relationship between the male and female gaze, the construction of femininity and masculinity prescribed by rigid traditionalism constrains the autonomy and expression of both sexes. Film theory, psychoanalysis, literary criticism, conduct literature, and other secondary scholarship richly contribute to and inform the literary analysis central to this study. In taking a feminist, historical, and literary theoretical framework, this research argues that a balanced and complementary relationship between the male and female form provides solace in their union and freedom from the hyper-male gaze rampant in oppressive traditionalism. This analysis explores Austen's last completed novel, *Persuasion*, and its construction of femininity and masculinity that results not from blindly accepting and acting in accordance with patriarchal standards but from a complementary relationship between the male and female gaze.

DEDICATION

To those who remind us that we are capable of more than we think.

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Contributors

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The analyses depicted in *A RECLAMATION OF SELF AND SOCIETY: COMPLEMENTARIANISM AND THE GAZE IN JANE AUSTEN'S PERSUASION* were conducted by me, Erin Clay. All relevant publications are cited in the thesis.

All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

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INTRODUCTION

Living on the coattails of the Enlightenment and at the helm of the Napoleonic wars, Jane Austen experienced English Regency society in its reaction to and evolution from such impressive periods in European history. Threats to the status quo, whether through progressive ideologies or foreign enemies, propelled many conservatives within Regency society to cling to and promote traditional values, thus marking the British Empire as morally strong and unified against threats of change. Upon her death in 1817, Austen's last completed work, *Persuasion*, published posthumously, embodies a maturity acquired from influential life experiences and societal changes. While this novel's subject matter, the rules and regulations of the gentry, retain commonality with Jane Austen's canon, Austen tangles and suspends the centrality of her typical plot structure, the marriage plot. Through her suspension of closure within the marriage plot due to a rejected proposal, Austen investigates the expectations of women within her patriarchal society. She unmaskes how the Regency era operated and structured itself primarily to satisfy the needs of paternal powers. While this analysis does not strictly categorize Austen's political leanings, it intends to accompany Austen on her investigation of the complexities of traditional forms of female agency, authority, and freedom within the Regency era.

With such importance placed on a unified and moral national image, individuals promoted personal appearance not only as the traditional distinguisher of one's status in greater society but also as an indicator of one's rightness. Austen biographer John Halperin asserts that "manners were seen as a reflection of morals" and thus ritualistically performed and paraded as external indicators of supposed internal realities (Halperin 12). Within a society of both "elegance and taste" and "squalor and callousness" rested a desire to preserve a refined sense of

beauty within its disillusioned world (Halperin 11). This dance often culminated in the sphere of courtship in which male suitors would gaze upon the available women of the season to discern their most profitable match. While the courting season proved taxing on the eligible, the finality of marriage provided relief and security. Claudia Johnson, a scholar of gender studies and British literature, asserts that a “public progressively more anxious about the respect of authority and the inviolability of marriage” benefits from such arrangements because its finality “orders, sanctifies, and perpetuates the interests of society” (Johnson 14). Marriage, thus, replenishes the status quo and a sense of rightness. Any deviation or distraction from such priority proves dangerous to the British empire and Regency society.

Austen suspends the marriage plot in *Persuasion* as her heroine rejects a proposal and enters an eight-year romantic estrangement. By defying the literary conventions of the traditional marriage plot, Austen explores and confronts traditional aspects of marriage and the male-dominated society it cultivates. Borrowing from contemporary feminist film theorist and critic Laura Mulvey, the “male gaze” prioritizes and protects all that is phallic. Coined by Mulvey, the “male gaze” identifies the objectification of women within modern film theory and its representative society as the securing and exaltation of male superiority and pleasure. While Mulvey comments on the presence of the male gaze in film, she claims that cinema is an “advanced representation system” of the world outside the cinematic screen (Mulvey 7). The worlds of film and society represent one another; thus, investigating norms within cinema offers insight into society’s motivations.

In her psychoanalysis of film, Mulvey argues that much of contemporary film centers around “phallicism,” which “depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world” and ultimately centralizes everything phallic as complete and right

(Mulvey 6). In her lack of anything phallic, the female form “speaks castration and nothing else” and ultimately threatens symbolic completeness (Mulvey 7). This opposition between the male and female forms leads the phallic power to suppress such a threat by objectifying the female form as an object to be looked at, desired, and commodified. It ultimately shapes the female body into a tamed form onto which “man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command” (Mulvey 7). In response, the woman’s desire centralizes around her embodiment of “the bleeding wound,” which only derives existence “in relation to castration and cannot transcend it” (Mulvey 7). The woman lives in subordination to the man as he innately and unconsciously desires to place her in submission to the bearer of rightness and completeness, the male body. To capsize the concept of the male gaze and address its presence in artistic and physical realms, Mulvey applies the operation of the male gaze in both fiction and reality.

Although this is a term Austen does not have access to during her time, she does have access to the concept through her personal experience living in the Regency era. The idea of the male gaze, when applied to Regency era conduct literature and conservative writings, is evidenced in the concept of the post-Edenic woman. In believing Eve was the first Mother of humanity and the first human to fall to the temptations of sin, the principle of original sin places women as the objects for birthing new life and sin. Conservative, religious platforms argued that women needed stricter adherence to the Scriptures to prevent their straying into sin and promote their husband’s righteousness. As the first woman tempted her husband to sin, the task of promoting holiness in her husband proves her eternal responsibility and penance. In comparing women to Eve, Regency women, under the guise of conservative values, pay the price for the “empoisoned apple,” and they are rightly suited “for an intellectually passive and supportive role” within society (Lady 54, Sulloway 114).

Regency marriage rested on female utility and its gendered functions. Johnson, in her discussion on the politics of marriage, argues that a woman's value rests in her dutiful submission to society and embodying female modesty as "the extent to which women do not feel, express, and pursue their own desires" unconsciously placing themselves as patrons of the male gaze (Johnson 14). Tamed and submissive, the female form is paralyzed by dutiful silence and obedience to custom and tradition. Alison Sulloway, Austen scholar, argues that Regency society expected four primary functions of femininity that call for a woman to be an "incubator for the heir...to be ornamental and beautiful...as a flower; to be as passive and receptive as flowers are...and to be as domestically useful as vegetables" (Sulloway 196). Such descriptions frame Regency women as passive players within their society, absent of self-agency and reassuring the male ego. While the extreme consciousness of external appearances applied to both sexes, women experienced a compounded pressure to regulate their external appearance. It aided them in fulfilling female utility in a male-dominated society and escaping the image of the fallen woman.

While the British Empire capitalized on the ideals of eighteenth-century traditionalism, more men desired women to remain in subordinate positions in their pursuit. The male gaze in strong operation during the time sponsored a "masculine craving for new and enlightened liberties" yet called for a "vehement public insistence upon woman's confinement in her limited province" (Sulloway 4). In its publicly circulated literature and customary institutions, the Regency era posits women as accessories to the phallic powers in their society. In her guide to Regency etiquette and femininity, a *Lady of Distinction* implores her female readers that "by making the fairness of the body the sign of the mind's purity," men will be attracted to them, as women are "the object designed for him by heaven as the partner of his life" and the "agent

which is to accompany him into eternity” (Lady 8-9). Like the men of their society, women relied on their external appearances to communicate their value and desirability. However, women’s bodies also measured their eligibility to fulfill their social function of marriage. As men pursued more freedoms and enlightened ideals during the Regency period, women remained constrained by their divine penance as the accessories and helpers of men. While men worked as makers of meaning, women preserved their tenderness and purity of mind to fulfill female utility.

Through her suspension of the marriage plot, Austen delays gratification in a linear, timely marriage plot desired by her society and readers. The narrative follows a tangle of time in the aftermath of the protagonist’s breakup and eight-year estrangement from a former love. It hosts what Johnson describes as a “temporal gap, to the time unwritten, but everywhere felt” (Johnson 147). In her interrupted courtship, the protagonist, Anne Elliot, is estranged from the physical and emotional presence of her love, Frederick Wentworth, and is also haunted by the memory of their past closeness. The reader sits with Anne as she limbos between her past and present, stuck in what appears to be a disastrous state of spinsterhood and melancholy. However, Anne is the most mature of Austen’s heroines, with more life experience and understanding than those coming of age. Because Anne outgrew much of the folly and frivolity of the typical Austen heroine before the beginning of the novel, Austen may deeper “explore female independence” without the obligation “to explore the concomitant impertinence” (Johnson 146). Anne’s present singleness bolsters Austen’s attempt to look beyond the surface of societal institutions and smuggle social commentary through the relationship of a spinster to her surrounding world.

The following analysis of *Persuasion* joins Austen in her investigation of the male gaze and its governing force in Regency society. Additionally, it argues that *Persuasion* posits a moderately feminist confrontation of the sovereign male gaze and not only attempts to introduce

a “female gaze” but also insists that a flourishing union of the female and male form results not from blindly accepting and acting in accordance with patriarchal standards but from a complementary relationship between the male and female gaze.

1. RIGID TRADITIONALISM

Crafting a melancholic tone at the novel's beginning, Austen introduces her reader to two governing deaths within the protagonist's life, which her heroine continues to mourn. By looking at the deaths looming over Anne and tracing their continued effect, one captures a glimpse into the autumnal mood at the novel's onset and Anne's characterization. In thinking about Austen's suspension of the marriage plot for the purpose of commenting on its constraining function in Regency society, investigation into the eight-year romantic estrangement of the heroine unpacks the governing constraints of rigid traditionalism.

Having lost her mother thirteen years prior to the beginning of the novel, the reader understands little information about Anne's mother during the active plot. The reader, instead, places her as a figure of the past and a figment of memory for many characters in the novel. Sir Walter Elliot's remembrance of his wife rests as a footnote in his prized possession, the *Baronetage*. This book of noble family genealogies mentions Lady Elliot briefly for her connections to the genteel elite and contributions to the Elliot family's legacy. While her limited portrait within the *Baronetage* paints her as a dutiful wife operating appropriately under her societal function, Austen offers her readers a closer glimpse into the life of such an honorable wife. Austen describes her as a "sensible and amiable" woman who "humoured, or softened, or concealed [the] failings" of her conceited and vain husband, Sir Walter Elliot (Austen 10). She proved an influential source of moderation and modesty for Kellynch Hall, and with her "died all such right-mindedness" (Austen 14). Although poorly matched and settled in an unhappy marriage out of social responsibility, Lady Elliot chose a life devoted to duty and social consequence. Austen asserts that while Lady Elliot lived "not the very happiest being in the

world,” she “found enough in her duties” to live happily enough (Austen 10). Operating in her duty to traditional Regency society, Lady Elliot stepped into her role as the wife of a silly man. She found her duties to the home distraction enough from her dissatisfaction.

Through this circumstance, Lady Elliot suffered a horrible fate. Her enjoyments could merely “attach her to life” but never allow her to indulge in living (Austen 10). Lady Elliot passively wafted through her life at Kellynch Hall, and she eventually reduced her existence to that of a functional purpose. She employed her time as a friend, mother, and wife and operated from a stance of female utility. Upon the coattails of vanity and rank, Lady Elliot found enough in her duties to appease the pressures of the Baronetage and her imposing society. Becoming a creature of functionality, Lady Elliot faded into the background of her own life and attempted to suppress the exhausting attitudes of her egoistic husband. Her presence in Kellynch Hall appeared almost ghostlike, without purpose. She carried herself on the promises of nostalgia, mourning the life that could have been. This lifeless and dismal experience of Lady Elliot carries into the present plot of the novel and crafts a nostalgic tone of woeful remembrance of the Elliot estate.

Amid such melancholia and mourning, Austen introduces her heroine and expounds on the resounding impact of this death. In her absence, Lady Elliot leaves “an awful legacy for a mother to bequeath” to her children (Austen 10). Anne inherits a life under the care and authority of a foolish father who only cares about physical beauty, social connections, and the company of his conceited family. Acting as an imprint of her mother, Anne lives in stark contrast to her father and sisters, who live centrally concerned with gaining attention and superficial admiration. Anne is a perpetual outcast within her own family. Despite her “elegance of mind and sweetness of character,” Anne is considered “nobody” within her family, as “only Anne” (Austen 11). To

her family, Anne lives as nothing, a lack, or a void. She is characterized by a sort of invisibility in the eyes of her genteel family, in which “her word had no weight” and presence held no significance (Austen 11). In the opinion of Sir Walter Elliot, Anne’s appearance over time had grown so “faded and thin” and in such profound opposition to his countenance that she “left nothing in them...to excite his esteem” (Austen 11). Anne’s complexion proves dull to her father and thus useless as she cannot embolden his vanity and pride of rank. Due to her complete dissonance from her father’s character and external standards, Anne’s faded form makes her an outcast within Kellynch Hall. She inherits the ghostlike frame and existence of her deceased mother within the walls of her home.

After her mother’s death, Anne experiences the second governing death in her life, the loss of a lover. Although not a permanent separation and literal death, this significant physical estrangement draws Anne further into melancholy and mourning. Having been persuaded by a trusted confidant to reject the engagement, Anne loses the love of her life. After receiving a proposal from Frederick Wentworth, an aspiring naval officer, Anne visits her mother’s friend, Lady Russell, who offers advice as a surrogate mother. While hosting a “rational and consistent” mind, Lady Russell also holds “prejudices on the side of ancestry” and for those of great rank and consequence (Austen 15). While Frederick Wentworth fosters the confident image of a self-made man and believes that his tenacity will allow him to gain such societal respect, Lady Russell believes Anne might be “sunk by him” and lose all claim to her social importance (Austen 27). Attempting to save Anne from a devastating life without consequence, Lady Russell advises against the arrangement and beckons Anne to seek socially acceptable and traditional security for happiness rather than risk comfort and consequence. Such passion persuades Anne to believe the engagement is “indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success” and almost

dangerous to her future (Austen 28). With such a young and gentle spirit in her youth, such cause for concern proved “more than Anne could combat,” and she rejects Wentworth’s engagement out of duty and familial responsibility rather than a lack of love and devotion (Austen 27-28). Like her mother, Anne yields to the hyper-traditionalism of her society that ascribes safety and security within the confines of the established classes of society. After eight years of estrangement from her former lover, the reader joins Anne in a world of regretful remembrance.

Comprising much of Anne’s psychological and physical characterization at the novel's beginning, Austen casts her protagonist into the background of the narrative and her own life. While Anne is visiting the Musgroves, the family requests that she play the piano and provide the room with music for dancing. Anne confesses that playing the piano is a lonely activity for her. She posits that she hadn’t “known the happiness of being listened to” since her mother’s passing (Austen 42). She understood that when she played the piano, “she was giving pleasure only to herself” as her music filled the room (Austen 42). While music may be known to temporarily provide its user with a melodic escape from everyday sorrows, this scene reads like an extension of Anne’s already present state of invisibility. Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, a scholar of British and French romanticism, investigates the relationship between Anne and music within the scene and parallels their function. She argues that similarly to Anne’s position within the background of social events, “her music pervades the room,” and “her grief saturates the scene at hand” (Heydt-Stevenson 60). Anne expresses her melancholia melodically in this scene as the piano, for a moment, represents her narrative body. While Anne prefers to aid and facilitate the enjoyment of others in the background, her position in this scene is dominated by her passivity and detachment from social interaction and jovial sentiments. Further, rather than occupying the

scene's background, Anne joins the social landscape's background rather than populating the foreground of social arenas.

Anne's external appearance alters during her separation from herself and her society. Replaying the losses she experienced, Anne feeds her mournful state, and it consumes her. While Heydt-Stevenson strongly posits that "Anne's loss assimilates her personality," such loss also catalogs and absorbs her bodily appearance (Heydt-Stevenson 59). Austen paints Anne as the portrait of a mourner, clouded by dread and memory, stranded in a season of sadness. Austen also describes Anne as "haggard" and in a state of wretched complexion (Austen 12). Anne's melancholy on a visual display; she is sorrowful, unwell, and drained. The loss of both her mother and her first love manifests a living death for Anne, having lost all purpose and meaning within her family and greater society. Scholar of nineteenth-century literature and culture, Mary Ann O'Farrell, asserts that Anne's noted loss of youth signals "some measure of dislocation from her body" and casts an effect of "deadening her affections" and her complexion (O'Farrell 32). Anne's deadened aesthetics dull her visibility to the outside world and create an estrangement between Anne and her bodily frame.

While Anne's bodily form drifts in the background of the narrative landscape, the return of her former lover, Wentworth, renews her sense of longing to be seen. Anne's ghostlike characterization and external frame find tension in Anne's embarrassment at being described as "so altered he should not have known her again" after so many years (Austen 53). The recollection of these remarks mortifies Anne. Upon inspection, she fears Wentworth's eye might cast her aside for her alteration. When Anne encounters Wentworth after receiving his expression of distaste for her appearance, she attempts to shield her altered features from his glances so he may not "trace in them of the ruins of the face which once charmed him" (Heydt-Stevenson 60).

Anne grows concerned that her face may resketch all that once was and produce a present disdain for her alteration. Internalizing his commentary, Anne reflects on the state of her body, measuring its own desirability. The ruins of Anne's face harness a picture of decay and destruction to something once flourishing. Anne's face hosts a deeply nostalgic air and tells a story of life once blooming and now withering. Heydt-Stevenson posits that Anne "expects him to see her as something dead," almost like a "memento mori where one finds inscribed the loss of love" (Heydt-Stevenson 60). A memento mori offers a warning of death and reminds the onlooker of the inevitability of loss. While her body occupies the background of the narrative landscape, it settles into the scene as a token of remembrance and tells a story of mourning the erosion of Anne's bloom.

After eight years of estrangement from her former lover, the reader joins Anne in a world of remembrance for all that was lost, the love of an emotionally absent mother and a passionate lover. She lives stranded as a singleton in the world of social gatherings and courting couples that surround her. Even though Anne obediently rejected Wentworth eight years ago, her loyalty to duty subjects her to the regretful and "serious portrait of the spinster" (Miller 70). The portrait of a spinster stood as both independent of connection and in rejection of traditional institutions. In Regency society, the female spinster poses a threat to familial legacies and reputations. Traditionalists villainized spinsters for seeking independence and autonomy outside of the institution of marriage. They socially marginalized these women because of their lack of aspiration to fulfill the centrally governing institution of English legacies: marriage. Judged for her untraditional relation to men, the spinster poses a threat to traditional social relations and confronts many societal tenants that exalt male authority, such as primogeniture. Whether by

circumstance or choice, a woman who extends her legacy rather than the family name is threatening in her ambition for autonomy and self-agency.

Anne's marriage plot is interrupted because of her rejection of Wentworth. She currently lives without attachment or direction, proving dismal for the spinster. Additionally, such a woman holds no promise of fulfilling feminine norms. While Regency era values of rank and consequence persuaded Anne in her early youth to reject Wentworth, this same social system now rejects her for failing to perform her primary function as a wife within the marriage institution. In agreement, Alison Sulloway asserts that Regency society rendered spinsters as "socially marginal embarrassments" and afforded their lack of marriage and children to an imperfection within themselves (Sulloway 22). In the mind of the genteel elite, the traditional structures of the Regency era did not fail the spinster; a spinster's imperfection and undesirable nature rendered them ineligible within the social system.

Although Anne's grievances place her as an outcast from herself, her family, and her society, Austen signals that her heroine's narrative death transforms into narrative life. Describing Lady Russell's loyalty and care for Anne, Austen writes that Lady Russell "could fancy the mother to revive again" in the form of Anne Elliot (Austen 11). In seeing a resemblance to her cherished friend, Lady Russell invests in nurturing and tending to Anne, treating her as a site of remembrance of another. Acting out of social duty, Anne and her mother mourn the consequence of their deference to patriarchal expectations and female functionality. Through their ghostlike losses, Lady Elliot and Anne exemplify the dangers of female passivity in the wake of hyper-traditionalism. They've experienced the sorrowful consequences of adhering to rigid traditionalism and sacrificing happiness to follow social norms. While Lady

Russell may wish Anne's mother revived in the likeness of Anne, perhaps Austen longs for something more than passivity and complacency for her heroine.

2. THINKING ABOUT THE FEMALE GAZE

While scholars point out that Anne's ghostlike characterization may correlate to her inability to fulfill the purpose of female utility, through extending her family's legacy and upholding traditional gender norms, the suspension of her marriage plot may also work as a vehicle for her to reflect and mature. Fading into the background of her world, Anne gains the space to reflect on her oppressive society before re-entry. While estrangement from self and society proves sorrowful for Anne, this separation serves a dual purpose. It uncovers the pain of the female body under the evaluative and objectifying male gaze while allowing the unseen to observe the social virtues that oppress it. Anne's isolation, caused by mourning and melancholia, invites her to observe the operation of Regency traditionalism in her social circles. Valerie Shaw asserts that separation from traditionalism positions Anne beyond the rigid confines of Regency society and leaves her "free to observe" the forces which exclude her from participation and oppress her agency outside of its tenants (Shaw 284). Shaw continues to explain that while the position of the observer holds a sense of power, "freedom brings more pain than pleasure" because it separates the heroine from marriage with her love, Wentworth (Shaw 284). While the suspension of the marriage plot creates tension between the reader and the narrative, it also creates a space in which Austen positions the institution of marriage as something to investigate and inspect. By suspending the marriage plot, Austen explores what lies beneath the social surface of the marriage institution and questions its function in Regency society.

In positioning Anne as an observer of her society, Anne gains the freedom to watch and reflect. Her spinsterhood marginalizes her from participating in the foreground of the novel and occupying the same space as those who adhere to traditionalism. Traditionalism populates the

foreground of the novel in the worlds of families, couples, and social connections. Because of her spinsterhood, Anne's social circles render her invisible by virtue of her removal from the traditional marriage plot. While Anne's occupation of the background of the narrative landscape may appear disempowering, it grants her opportunities to actively observe her world rather than passively playing victim to it. As Regency society limits verbal communication, a feminist narrative theorist Robyn Warhol contends that Anne uses "looking and interpreting others' looks ... as an alternative language" and mode of communication (Warhol 6-7). This act of looking at the body and interpreting its meaning is what some scholars contend and conceptualize as the "female gaze." While the male gaze defines the operation and exaltation of the phallic and the patriarchal desire to objectify the female form, the female gaze does not assign ultimate value to the body's surface.

Austen scholar Robyn Warhol describes this feminine look as one that "sees surface and significance as integrally related" (Warhol 12). Warhol contends that the female gaze not only notices the body but also works to decipher its external display as a signifier of a significant internal experience. In other words, under the female gaze, the body is an avenue for understanding the host's inner life. When visualizing the world through the male gaze, there is a binary sense of the gendered functions of men and women. Men are active, and women are passive. Women are to be looked at, and men are to look. In contrast, the female gaze identifies the onlooker as a seeker, seeing the surface as a means to understand the deeper meaning. The female gaze posits that "bodies are not merely objects but are signs to be read," Anne uses this feminine look to interpret other characters' motivations and opinions (Warhol 13). As the mute onlooker, Anne allows the external and internal to express and communicate feelings and desires

outside of the binary operation of the male gaze that directly correlates beauty with consequence and desirability with value.

Separated from the pressures of a male-dominated society because of her spinsterhood, Anne's undesirable and phantom-like state frees her to observe her society. She harnesses the female gaze while watching the characters around her and analyzing their intentions and desires. She looks not to objectify but to interpret. Upon the return of her estranged lover, Wentworth, Anne employs this feminine look to communicate with Wentworth and interpret the meanings beyond his external display. The first encounter after their eight-year estrangement sends Anne into a frantic attempt to understand and interpret his opinion of her. After having experienced "events of every description, changes, alienations, and removals" from Wentworth in their youth, Anne desperately desires to understand him intimately and cries, "how were his sentiments to be read" (Austen 53). Anne's eye desired to interpret Wentworth's external body to understand the depth of emotion his body stores. She wonders if he holds resentment and anger or nostalgia and tenderness after their eight-year silence and uses the feminine look to investigate the reality of his sentiments. The young lovers, once fluent in the body language between them, renegotiate their relationship through the expression of their bodies. They decipher the body's speech through various events and circumstances and now explore the mature and altered flesh they possess. Anne desperately attempts to read Wentworth's body at their reunion to test the realities of their relationship after so many years.

Exploring each other's alteration, Anne and Wentworth negotiate their present relationship by interpreting each other's mental and physical maturity. Their present bodies act as a mode for understanding the changes they've both experienced over their eight-year estrangement. The body acts not only as a mode of remembrance but also as one of

reacquaintance. As their bodies have physically changed, so has their relationship with each other. Heydt-Stevenson asserts that Anne and Wentworth “recall and resketch the past,” and in doing so, they form “landscapes for each other to inspect” and investigate (Heydt-Stevenson 55). In looking at their altered bodies, the pair recollect the memories of their relationship before Anne fell to rigid traditionalism. Anne returns to Wentworth’s body throughout the novel as a means of deciphering not only their past but also their present relationship. Their bodies become a site for remembrance. However, this may also act as an avenue to shed the nostalgia Anne so deeply grasps as she mourns. Looking at Wentworth’s body in the present, Anne reconstructs the past, and she gains consciousness of Wentworth’s body in its present significance. As a landscape to be read, Wentworth’s body tells a story of change, deconstruction, and regrowth. Anne observes his external body as a bridge during their eight-year estrangement, gaining knowledge of his present sentiments through the feminine look.

While the female gaze empowers Anne to investigate both the melancholic past and present, it reflects the dual nature of the gaze itself. While the feminine look does gaze at the body’s surface, it assesses the internal component of one’s personhood to evaluate and determine one’s value and significance. The female gaze “neither ignores the body nor objectifies it” but instead interprets it through its relation to the inner life of the person (Warhol 12). When dining with the Musgroves, Anne closely observes Wentworth’s face as he responds to Mrs. Musgrove’s rapport with him and honor towards him. Mrs. Musgrove explains the happiness of their wayward son under Wentworth’s care, and she extends gratitude for his provision for their family. While Wentworth accepts their kindnesses, Anne interprets from “a certain glance of his bright eye, and curl of his handsome mouth” that Wentworth had “probably been at some pains to get rid of him” (Austen 58). Wentworth’s expression convinces Anne of the character of the

absent party, and she admires Wentworth's restraint in not speaking ill of their troublesome son. While this passage proves exemplary of Anne's ability to interpret Wentworth's external form, it also highlights the dual reality of the female gaze. While it holds the power to interpret the external body, it also desires it. The male gaze is often attributed to the desire of the masculine authority to tame the feminine through objectification, placing it as a submissive object of desire. However, the female gaze may also take pleasure in desiring the masculine form. Although Anne finds the curl of Wentworth's mouth evaluative of his opinions of the Musgrove son, she also finds his form pleasurable and attractive. The female gaze, in this passage, appears to desire bodily form without a binary sense of desirability. The female gaze may look and desire without objectifying the body. Perhaps the desiring element of the gaze proves natural and effective when harnessed in attempts to understand and interpret rather than dominate or subdue.

Through interpreting Wentworth's momentary expression at the Musgroves,' one gains insight into the heroine's experience in receiving such knowledge. Warhol asserts that the "heroine's access to knowledge" may be understood through the "act of looking" while her access to pleasure can be acknowledged through her "textual consciousness of the body" (Warhol 6). While Anne's access to knowledge may prove painful at times, as she gains insight into the genuine feelings of her social world, she also receives pleasure in looking at the external body. Especially in the case of Wentworth, Anne acknowledges her attraction to his body and communicates that while the body may be looked at, desirability does not always result in objectification. Bodies seen and desired operate in the novel's foreground and may be interpreted and inspected. Placing Wentworth's body at the end of her gaze, Anne's eye acknowledges the power of the feminine look to desire and its power to do so without reducing the body to its external appearance, disregarding the significance of its internal operation. In her act of looking,

Anne recognizes the power of seeing and being desired and read. A Lady of Distinction describes this in her Regency conduct manual, *Mirror of Graces*. She notes that women enjoy “enjoy the pleasures of the senses” and of desire but also the “shoot from mind to mind, in the pressure of a hand, the glance of an eye” delicately exchanged from one body to another (Lady 2). While those operating under the female gaze delight in desire, they also enjoy the outward expression of the body as a means of conveying hope and affection. Thus Anne Elliot, when in dire need of understanding Wentworth, pleads to herself that she may not “quit the room in peace without seeing Captain Wentworth once more” (Austen 153). The female gaze proves exploratory in nature, delighting in attraction to the body’s surface but strongly longing to discover what lies beneath.

While Anne mourns the death of a love that could have been, she reflects on the nature and terms of its termination. She navigates her present relationship with Wentworth through the lens of the interpretative female gaze and traces Wentworth’s eye to monitor his sentiments towards her. She employs the eye as a tool to “test reality,” to determine if Wentworth still holds love for her and to “reconstruct her role in ending their engagement” (Heydt-Stevenson 59). When joined in the Concert Room after the aftermath of Louisa’s tragic fall, Anne monitors Wentworth’s eyes. She interprets that his “half-averted eyes, and more than half expressive glance” declare a “heart returning to her at last” (Austen 150). During a conversation with Anne, Wentworth reveals his contentment in the aftermath of Louisa’s fall. After discussing his freedom from fear of her wounds to his ceased social attachment to her, Wentworth carries a sense of lightness that translates to Anne. Austen describes Anne as appearing “to pity every one, as being less happy than herself” (Austen 149). Even after separation in the Concert Room, Anne notices Wentworth’s half-averted eyes, focused on the room and communicating a recovered

disposition towards her. His half-expressive glance promoted more than decency towards her. However, Wentworth's eyes and glances exhibit half expressions that signal a revived passion and desire for Anne's company and his happiness. Anne interprets his glances with pleasure as they mark the development of his feelings for her. In Anne's mind, Wentworth's glance is a hinting indicator of a love revived, a love returned.

While the female gaze may result in a dually painful and pleasurable experience for the heroine, Anne's ability to observe her world leads her to recall the past and interpret the present. While the act of looking and watching may appear a passive activity, the female gaze actively watches to analyze and understand. O'Farrell mentions that while Anne's perpetual desire to watch Wentworth may appear "dispirited and weak," it may also be "touching in its determination" (O'Farrell 36). Through continuously working to understand Wentworth in relation to his external frame, Anne's gaze proves a "strong and private attempt to reclaim narrative" and agency (O'Farrell 36). Anne's approach to gaining agency and autonomy throughout the novel appears more subdued than that of other Austen heroines; however, it retains a determination to transition from narrative death to life. After years of ghostlike characterization, Anne attempts to interpret her oppressive society and monitor her relationship to signify a movement from a passive to an active agent. Though Anne's operation of the female gaze appears private and subdued, something kept to herself, her desire for "seeking and seeing Wentworth's displeasure" amounts to her need to "tell for herself the story of her losses and of his" (O'Farrell 36). In other words, the female gaze, whether resulting in a painful or pleasurable experience, is a tool of reclamation. Pain and pleasure revive Anne and catalyze her to reclaim narrative and agency. Anne looks at Wentworth to understand his inner life and her own story as written on his face. Wentworth's landscape tells the story of their broken engagement, years

separated by sea, and their renewed acquaintance. Through seeking and seeing Wentworth's face, she initiates her transformation from her narrative death to life.

Through the female gaze, Anne challenges the operation of the male gaze and Regency era gender norms. She asserts the authority of her eye, gradually shedding the role of the passive object of the active interpreter. Austen scholar Judy van Sickle Johnson argues that while the Austen canon may contend that the physical body and its part are "seemingly trivial instruments," they operate as a "reliable measure of feignedness or authenticity of human feelings" (Van Sickle Johnson 45). The body works as a display or extension of human feelings, externally representing its governing heart and mind. While the body may be desired, objectifying its surface creates an incomplete picture of personhood and devalues the objectified party. The eyes and the body's appendages within the novel illustrate this undercurrent in Regency society. With the female gaze, Anne's eye "is not just lucid but empowering," as it allows her to clearly see her social circles and autonomously operate within them (Warhol 9). Harnessing a sense of autonomy, Anne resketches her past and present in relation to a lucid knowledge of the rigid traditionalism she fell prey to in her youth and its continued presence in her social circles. She works with the female gaze to access pain and pleasure in her form as an avenue to read the landscape of love in Wentworth's body and recall consciousnesses to her body. The female gaze allows Anne to gain agency, shed passivity, and temporarily suspend her melancholy.

While many scholars consider the trip to Lyme as the turning point in the novel for Anne, it also importantly proves a crossroads for Wentworth as both individuals navigate the relationship between social conventions and their expected appearances. Anne and Wentworth glimpse into the complex intersection of the body with its will and motivation.

3. THE INTERSECTION AT LYME

Through her employment of the female gaze, Anne learns that to be read like a sign or landscape, the body must be rendered legible. While the female gaze holds the power to assign significance to the relationship between the body's surface and its internal experience, there remains the necessity to be seen. The body must be seen and considered desirable to be read and interpreted. While desirability does not directly correlate to sexual or romantic desire, the body's desirability assigns an inherent value to the form's surface. The body may not constantly be subjected to the phallic desire to objectify it, but to be considered worthy to be seen, the body must be visible. Nor is the male or female gaze solely attributed to one sex. Lady Russell and Anne's sister, Elizabeth, operate under the tenants of the male gaze. They commodify rank, consequence, and beauty as indicators of internal rightness. Elizabeth recognizes the beauty in herself and others as telling of their social importance and desirability. At the same time, Lady Russell attributes the polished manner and etiquette of Mr. Elliot as a signifier of his moral correctness. Under the male gaze, these women find little to see beyond what appears tangibly before their eyes. Rather than contingent on biological loyalties, both the male and female gaze uphold ideas and values able to be harnessed by both sexes. When looking at the intersections of the male and female gaze, one gains insight into the relationship between these two social authorities. Although Anne's position as a mute observer of her world equips her to criticize and reflect on it, it leaves her unable to be counted as desirable because she lies in the background of her social scene.

The Regency society's class system indicates an understanding of this principle and reflects the Austenian notion of desirability politics. Those of the genteel elite or noble families

proved worthy of being seen because of their wealth, title, or consequence. They adhered to and upheld the governing institutions of their society by safeguarding their family's legacy.

Connections among the elites were intricate and necessary to retain one's social consequence.

Outside this governing class of traditionalism lived the working class, who worked as supporters rather than active possessors of traditionalism. They lived as servants, farmers, or tradesmen in the background of noble life. Austen exemplifies the life of the working-class woman through her character, Mrs. Smith, who fell from social consequence to a life of dependence on caretakers and gossip. She lives as a consumer of gossip and rumors, unable to live among the elite any longer. She occupies the background of social circles, excluded from the rank of those that Mary Ann O'Farrell considers "fit to be seen" (O'Farrell 51). This is the classification of desirability through which some are fated for the background of the social landscape and others for the foreground. Warhol asserts that the working class "can look but cannot be seen" as that pleasure remains reserved for socially desirable bodies (Warhol 14). Exemplified by their limited representation within the foreground or even background of the novel, working bodies "have no bodies" and consequently have "no access to the kind of power Anne comes to hold" through her wielding of the feminine look (Warhol 14). The class status of the working hands bars them from legibility and characterizes them as shapeless and without form. While they may gossip or glimpse into the genteel life that society excludes them from, the working class's social status acts as a partition or film, blocking them from visibility. This narrative representation lends to the textual "awareness of two maturing powers" that of the "power to attract men and to be attracted by them" (Sulloway 150). While these two maturing powers empowered female bodies, it remains a reserved privilege for the socially desirable. Within *Persuasion*, Anne's gaze empowers her to see and observe, but her melancholy casts her into the background of the

narrative landscape and renders her body illegible. Anne must both see and be seen to satisfy the marriage plot.

Austen explores the correlation between the unseen and the male gaze through Anne as she is fit to be seen but ghostlike in her characterization. Socially eligible because of her rank and consequence to the circle of desirability, Austen investigates how the male gaze can revive appearance rather than strip it. While the male and female gaze rely on the body to exercise authority, Austen explores what occurs at the intersection of these two looks during Anne's visit to Lyme and their effects on the body. When casually strolling along the sea, Anne's face caught the eye of Mr. Elliot, and "he looked at her with a degree of earnest admiration" that subsequently made her blush (Austen 87). Mr. Elliot's gaze, admiring her physical form, caused the "bloom and freshness of youth restored" with the "animation of an eye" (Austen 87). Mr. Elliot's attraction to Anne's countenance and frame signals a second spring, and blush colors her cheeks again. Anne's blush, O'Farrell asserts, "renders the body and character legible" and pushes Anne from the narrative background to the foreground of the landscape (O'Farrell 4). Mr. Elliot's gaze positions Anne as worthy of being seen, visible, and legible once again. His look and admiration catalyze her release from melancholy and escape from the narrative background. Additionally, his admiring gaze "activated her to escape melancholy" and the realm of external passivity she displayed (Sokolsky 140). Although Anne later learns of his ill intentions and pries behind his socially polished surface, his objectifying eye catalyzes two events: the revival of Anne's physical complexion and the recovery of Wentworth's desire for Anne.

The complexity of this reviving gaze and the admiration of Mr. Elliot's eye rests in its objectifying nature. Mr. Elliot looks to desire and objectify external appearances. He lusts after Anne's physical form because his connection to it instigates his social elevation and

respectability. Anne's body, as a member of the genteel ranks, renders her not only legible to Mr. Elliot but it also marks her as prey for his ambitious eye. Mr. Elliot's attraction to Anne correlates with what association with her body may grant him: social access and respectability. He navigates this desire by pursuing her via traditional courtship. Mr. Elliot manipulates his social circles by superficially adhering to their code of desirability and seeks to enforce such rigid traditionalism on others. He hides behind polished appearances and attempts to mask his true character. He lives as a consumer of opportunity for social elevation and evaluates his connections by their traditional external qualifications: rank, wealth, and consequence. He upholds the desirability politics coherent with Regency society. While the motivation behind Mr. Elliot's admiration for Anne may prove ill-intentioned, its presence at Lyme initiates a revival of Anne's complexion and recovery of Wentworth's desire for it.

With her bloom and freshness of youth restored, Anne's external appearance signals an internal transition from the phantom-like and painful presence of the heroine to one of youth and pleasure. Members of Anne's social circles, like her father and Lady Russell, notice her altered exterior, finding her "blessed with a second spring of youth and beauty" that improved her drastically (Austen 101). The diction surrounding Anne's external transformation communicates that her transformation is not a mere blush but a restoration of what it once was. Anne's second spring of youth offers her a second chance upon reentry to her traditional Regency society after having played observer to it for roughly eight years. After seeing the return of blush to her cheeks and glow upon her skin, the female body, Warhol claims, transitions from the narrative background to the foreground "not just as a vehicle of looking" within the text but also "as the object of the gaze" of others (Warhol 7). While Anne's employment of the female gaze propels her as an active member of her society rather than a passive victim to it, she also gains power by

standing as an object of desire for others. The heroine “takes shape” in the objectifying gaze of male characters, ironically giving her body legibility and authority (Warhol 7). In taking shape and form, Anne is temporarily removed from her melancholic existence and returns to the ranks of those fit to be seen. Her body is visible and considered desirable by the male gaze; Anne shifts to the foreground of the narrative and trades a world of passivity and the working-class fate of invisibility for “the realm of attraction” (O’Farrell 51).

While the gaze of Mr. Elliot catalyzes Anne’s transformation from narrative death to life, his look also results in Wentworth’s confrontation of the past. Heydt-Stevenson considers the blush of Anne’s complexion as a “restorative” of not only her youth and beauty but also of Wentworth’s awareness and desire (Heydt-Stevenson 70). For Wentworth, the restorative nature of the blush depends on the operation of triangular desire. This occurs when a third person works as a “stand-in for their very selves” and aids them to “reconstruct what the relationship was, could have become, and might be” (Heydt-Stevenson 57). Through witnessing the exchange of attraction between Mr. Elliot and Anne, Wentworth recovers his sense of attraction towards her. Heydt-Stevenson continues to note that “desire is mediated through and in part constituted” by the presence of Mr. Elliot as a third party (Heydt-Stevenson 57). Through observing the interaction between Mr. Elliot and Anne, Wentworth reconstructs the similar moments and attraction he experiences with Anne. As the female gaze and attention to Wentworth’s body allows Anne to resketch their past, triangular desire frees Wentworth to explore his past with Anne.

After observing Anne’s interaction with Mr. Elliot, Wentworth “looked around at her instantly” and offers her a “momentary glance” (Austen 87). Wentworth attempts to see Anne’s reaction to Mr. Elliot’s flirtation and is captivated by her renewed glow. He extends to her a

“glance of brightness,” which both acknowledges the presence of another suitor and communicates on his behalf that “even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again” (Austen 87). Anne’s glow and blush visually restore life to her body through aesthetics. The ruins of her face now glow and bloom—the autumnal exchanges itself for spring. Through triangular desire, Anne’s body likens to its former frame and brings a sense of familiarity to Wentworth. As he recognizes her body once again, he acknowledges Anne Elliot again. Anne’s body works as a vehicle for Wentworth to recall his past sentiments towards her and revive them in the present circumstance. While estranged from Anne for eight years and occupied in the military, Wentworth grew brazen and obstinate in his opinions of Anne’s folly. He blamed her for submitting to rigid traditionalism because it rejected their potential future and assumed he held an arrogant character and uncertain future. The painful experience of Wentworth’s initial rejection and witnessing another man’s pursuit of Anne awakens remembrance. While nostalgia may have cornered Anne into melancholic passivity for a term, nostalgia and remembrance empower Wentworth to reconsider and negotiate his own pain and pleasure. Triangular desire renders Anne’s body legible and available to the desiring eye and wields power to resketch the past.

Although Wentworth’s eye finds Anne desirable and attractive, Austen uses triangular desire rather than a direct experience to comment on the oppressive nature of the male gaze when informed by rigid traditionalism and hints at an alternative understanding of masculinity. Observing such male characters as Sir Walter Elliot and Mr. Elliot prioritizing appearances and “preoccupied with looks and looking” makes clear that these men exalt not only rigid traditionalism but also wield the male gaze (Warhol 9). The purpose of their gaze is to objectify the “objects of their gaze with a value strictly commensurate with appearances” (Warhol 9).

These men simplify the human frame to its social significance and commodify its appearance. Austen represents such men as worldly and superficial. They prove insincere and proud. In other words, a man who “makes it his business to look evaluatively at others’ bodies” is not a man owed respect (Warhol 11). The gaze of such men proves manipulative and dehumanizing, prioritizing the body as an object to tame or desire rather than to understand or love. Returning to the idea of the binary vision of the male gaze, male characters and sometimes even female characters operating under rigid traditionalism objectify not only the bodies around them for their own ambition but also devalue the institutions they wish to uphold. People become pawns, and marriage becomes a game.

Austen contrasts Wentworth to male characters such as Mr. Elliot and Sir Walter Elliot through triangular desire. To uphold his honorable characterization within the novel, Wentworth “cannot make an object of Anne by looking at her body directly” even though he desires her (Warhol 11). Austen places Wentworth in the complex position of needing to be “distinguished from the men who look solely to objectify” while also “having to learn to notice and admire” Anne’s body (Warhol 12). To explore this fragile nature of desire, Austen makes Wentworth “take his first cue from the look of a less masculine man,” Mr. Elliot (Warhol 12). Triangular desire exposes Mr. Elliot as a less masculine man because of his objectifying gaze, while it allows Wentworth to admire Anne’s body through a secondary glance. Because Wentworth is not a man of rank or wealth but rather a man of deeds, he retains his honorable characterization through triangular desire. Austen proposes that while the masculine authorities of the Regency era may prize rank and consequence in social institutions and expect women to submit to their position as extenders of noble legacy, perhaps this binary expectation for men and women objectifies and dehumanizes the human form to mere functionality. In the example of

Wentworth, Austen seeks a potential substitute for the man of rank and wealth for one of honorable deeds and pursuits. The lack of objectification in Wentworth's gaze posits him as the viable contender for Anne's heart.

While Mr. Elliot's gaze objectifies Anne at Lyme, she does not stay passive during his employment of it. As Mr. Elliot's gaze evaluates her body's appearance, she interprets his internal reality. Their exchange of glances at Lyme propels Anne into an investigation of this notable character. Through building their acquaintance, Anne acknowledges that after hearing his family and Lady Russell praise his manners and character, she had "the sensation of there being something more than immediately appeared" (Austen 114). Anne believed there had to be more to his "very gentlemanlike appearance, his air of elegance and fashion, his good shaped face" and polished civility (Austen 114). She soberly accounts for the curious time of his reunion with her family. After Anne hesitantly parades a man "whose tongue never slipped," Mrs. Smith later proves her suspicions correct and testifies that he "is a man without heart or conscience" (Austen 131, 160). Mrs. Smith expresses that Mr. Elliot's core is "black at heart, hollow and black," contriving and designing a false sincerity to satisfy his greed (Austen 160). Having been persuaded once before to evaluate potential suitors by their traditional accolades and genteel rank, Anne does not fall to the same fate. She reverses a history of passivity within her family and rejects a man of ill character and conceited intentions. Anita Sokolsky remarks that Mr. Elliot would "have reinstigated the very melancholy dynamic he had seemed to help dispel by his affirmation of Anne" after the meeting at Lyme (Sokolsky 139). The admiration of Mr. Elliot's eye attempts to capitalize on Anne's societal connections to bolster his own with the intention of constraining her to a life of duty and submission. However, in reversing this fate, Anne's female gaze guards her against the passivity that once threw her into melancholia.

The scene at Lyme presents the novel's climax, in which Anne's body transitions from narrative death to life when met with the admiration of the male eye. While this scene progresses the plot as it softens Anne's exterior and Wentworth's sentiments, it reveals that there is power in being seen. Although the male gaze objectifies Anne, it catalyzes her return to the realm of attraction and visibility necessary for her ability to attract a husband. Austen scholar Jocelyn Harris parallels the earth's seasons with that of the heart, asserting that if "autumn promises spring, melancholy promises hope" (Harris 194). If Anne's autumnal world gradually blooms into a second spring, her inner world sheds her season of melancholy for that of hope. Spring bursts forth new life and prunes itself of all that is dead. Anne experiences a rebirth and an "escape into a world of purpose, energy, and radiant life" (Harris 195). Her body visually discards her ghostlike complexion for that of youth and bloom, revealing a profound shift in her internal and external display. She opens herself to hope and love once again.

While Austen plays with the visual aesthetics of the body in relation to objectification and desirability, she questions the relationship between the male and female gaze. She ponders the implications of both authorities being recognized and active within Regency society. While the intersection at Lyme acknowledges the necessity of the female form to see and be seen, it also criticizes the rampant exaltation of the male gaze in Regency life. The intersection of the male and female forms may prove mutually beneficial and transformative. It is through the female gaze that Anne actively interprets and navigates her world and the male gaze through which her body returns to the foreground of the narrative landscape and renders her both legible and desirable again. Anne's transformation from narrative life and death may be attributed to the contributions of both gazes in their unique relationships with the body's desire and authority.

Because both the male and female gaze are necessary for Anne's reclamation of self and society, what should the interplay of these gazes look like? Does the rise of female agency in society threaten rigid traditionalism?

4. COMPLEMENTARIANISM

As the novel focuses on the progression of Anne's marriage plot, it also highlights the Crofts as a foil to many other couples within the novel. While the metanarrative of the novel ponders the relationship of the female form under the male gaze and uncovers the passive womanhood rigid traditionalism prescribes, Austen also offers her reader a glimpse into complementary interplays between both masculine and feminine. Through the Crofts, Austen tests traditional ideas of marriage and gender conventions. She allows the reader to wonder what a balanced relationship looks like between the two forms: without one overpowering the other. While this analysis does not directly join the scholarly debate on Austen's measure of feminist pursuits, it does acknowledge that a new structure of gendered relationships was unconventional during her time. This analysis coined this relationship as the complementarian approach in which males and females prove unique but not in opposition. Additionally, these two forces constitute a balanced and compromising sense of authority rather than casting one body as the dominant and the other as submissive. While this rests in deep contrast to the traditional marriage institution of the Regency society, its presence in the novel not only proves harmonious but also models for the upcoming military life Wentworth and Anne face together. As most of Croft's marriage occurs onboard military ships, their marriage is a testament to the freedom and agency found when separated from rigid traditionalism.

When looking at the Crofts as a case study for the complementarian relationship, one must investigate the couple as individuals and explore how they compare and contrast their expected gender roles. In placing Mr. Croft within the ranks of men like Mr. Elliot or Wentworth, Mr. Croft belongs among the latter. He aligns with the gentlemanly "propensity for

not looking at the body or its ornaments” to determine significance (Warhol 11). Mr. Croft’s inclination lies not in objectifying the body as he barely notices the two ladies’ appearances. Even when asked his opinion of Louisa or Henrietta for Wentworth’s future wife, he responds that while they are both fine ladies, “I hardly know one from the other” (Austen 78). In lacking the objectifying lens of the superficial masculinity male characters such as Mr. Elliot or Sir Walter Elliot espouse, Mr. Croft not only rises to the rank of an honorable gentleman but also rejects the tenants of desired femininity exalted by Regency society.

Perhaps more potently than her husband, Mrs. Croft defies the traditional conventions of womanhood through the relationship between her manners and her body. Society assumed that the weather-beaten and overworked, especially people in seafaring life, looked ragged and unkempt. Their demeanor similarly expected to appear degraded and ignorant of the pleasantries and gentleness of genteel life. Mrs. Croft’s external form, having experienced many years at sea for the more significant part of her thirty-eight years, hosts a “reddened and weather-beaten complexion” (Austen 44). She does not display the delicate and pristine face or body of a woman having never faced the roaring sea or the immediate threat of war. Her time at sea changed her appearance and cast her as visually defiant of her delicate feminine physique. In contrast to her body, her manners proved “open, easy, and decided,” and she displayed no lack of confidence in herself and her abilities (Austen 44). Although her physical appearance may have given way to the harsh climates she experienced, O’Farrell posits that her intact and honorable manners contradict the “fantasy that coarseness of skin implies coarseness of feeling” (O’Farrell 46). Within the world of manners, Mrs. Croft navigates genteel life confidently and admirably despite her physical alteration from the sea. Mrs. Croft’s body, through its stark contrast in body and

mind, confronts the gender expectations that the rugged, aged, or unconventional form correlates to an unruly and unmannered spirit.

Not only does Mrs. Croft's body discredit the uncompromising correlation between external and internal appearance, but it also confronts the societal fascination with the external expression of the body, indicating a sense of one's moral rightness. When Wentworth and Mrs. Croft discuss the implications of women living on board a military ship, Wentworth argues that women should occupy no space aboard because of their delicate sensibilities. While this sentiment may be conducted out of a chivalrous mindset, a woman's presence aboard displeases him because he believes "delicacy and strength are sex-typed oppositions reinforced by class" and protect the women's innocence (Johnson 152). Wentworth finds the coexistence of delicacy and strength in a woman as distasteful and unfeminine. Mrs. Croft offers a rebuttal saying that he talks as if "women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures" and asserts that no woman will "expect to be in smooth water all out days" (Austen 60). She defends women's resiliency not by calling all women aboard a military ship but by equating trials and difficulty with waters. Every woman experiences the choppy waves of defeat or the storming seas of sorrow. Mrs. Croft universalizes womanhood, not as a life untouched by difficulty but as one of perseverance and strength. When confronting Wentworth for his narrow-minded and picturesque vision of true femininity, Mrs. Croft's illustration of the smooth water woman confronts the man who once "condemned Anne Elliot for her craven feminine submission," the very principle he desires women to uphold to rigid traditionalism and her family for something more (Sulloway 183).

It cannot go unacknowledged that Wentworth, a man once adamantly against a woman's presence at sea, marries Anne with a potential sea-faring marriage. Although Wentworth's opinions may not stand entirely changed by the end of the novel, he matured in respect to his

understanding of the strength and delicacy of women. While triangular desire at Lyme proved beneficial in reviving the external appearance of Anne, Louisa's accident at the stairs alongside the shoreline catalyzed a shift not only in Wentworth's approach to women's delicacy but also his approach to Anne's own duality of strength and delicacy. Judy van Sickle Johnson asserts that Lyme "marks the end of Captain Wentworth's attachment to Louisa" and it opens the way for more frequent and direct discourse" between Wentworth and Anne (Van Sickle Johnson 56). After Louisa's accident, Wentworth, "turning to her and speaking with a glow" mentions to the group that Anne should remain with Louisa and tend to her (Austen 95). He consults her on his visiting Louisa's parents to explain her traumatic fall, offering a powerful "deference for her judgment" (Austen 98). Jocelyn Harris posits that Wentworth learns to "distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will" through the comparison of Anne's fall to persuasion and Louisa's fall to stubbornness (Harris 208). Harris continues to argue that Wentworth learns to criticize those who stubbornly refuse to accept any persuasion and to "appreciate a more balanced equality like the Crofts" (Harris 208). While Louisa's fall caused Wentworth to re-evaluate his understanding of female delicacy and strength, Anne's rescue and care for Louisa illustrate the presence of both virtues in her. Although a potential future at sea may prove challenging for Anne and Wentworth, their appreciation and honor for each other's character will aid them in their trials.

Austen's inclusion of Mr. and Mrs. Croft's untraditional sea-faring marriage not only illustrates how the couple adheres to and differs in gender expectations in their society, but it also challenges conventional relationships between wives and husbands. Living at sea, the couple finds themselves separate from family, friends, and the company of social circles. Although they may discover a familial bond with other sailing military families, the Crofts rely on each other to

a heightened degree. While conversing about the woman's place on land and her lack of respectability at sea, Mrs. Crofts concedes that, at times, the absence of Mr. Croft proved a great difficulty. She lived fearfully and concerned but asserts that when they were together, "nothing ever ailed" her and that she "never met with the smallest inconvenience" (Austen 61). Living together and communing with one another proved enough to conquer the most dangerous moments and the slightest complaints. While the typical Regency couple may find security in the rank or wealth of their match, the Crofts established a sense of security in their shared company no matter their circumstance.

While one might contend that this marriage relationship may be fanciful when not faced with the frightening realities of war, the Croft's complementary relationship translates to their time on land. Before Mr. Croft almost crashes their carriage during travel, Mrs. Croft saves them when "cooly giving the reins a better direction herself" (Austen 78). Via her direction and provision, Mrs. Croft rescues her passengers and does not allow them to fall "into a rut, nor ran foul of a dung-cart" (Austen 78). Reflecting on the circumstance, Anne notes that this exchange of authority between the Crofts provides "no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs," a metaphor for recognized equality among them (Austen 78). Such equality is uncommon in the marriages Anne observes, and it embodies the relationship she desires. Harris describes Anne's passion for a relationship that prioritizes "not sovereignty, not weakness, but a sense that both are 'more equal to act'" (Harris 207-208). Because one party does not seek sovereignty or power over the other, the two parties share everything. Through the passing of the reigns, O'Farrell asserts that the Crofts "enact a fantasy of the couple as a machine" and "their marriage a vehicular adventure" (O'Farrell 48). Both Mr. and Mrs. Croft initiate action within their marriage – neither one is dominating or subordinate. Metaphorized as a machine or a

vehicle, the couple serves a purpose and continues to move and produce. The Crofts, as individuals and a couple, confront the strict Regency standards and expectations for femininity, masculinity, and marriage. Their union of two active players in their marriage provides a microcosmic illustration of how both the male and female forms might operate harmoniously together.

The Crofts, in their complementarian relationship, introduce Anne into a balanced partnership of the male and female form. Mrs. Croft embodies the “figure of what Anne Elliot could or would become as a naval wife” and illustrates the “fantasy of a heroine who has matured” from her hardships in the world (O’Farrell 47). Mrs. Croft, in her relationship with her husband, reflects a partnership in which the masculine does not objectify or oppress, and the feminine gains agency and autonomy for the betterment of both parties. As a doer and maker, Mrs. Croft rejects the passive womanhood rigid traditionalism espouses and offers a new construction of femininity within Regency society. In grasping this complementarian partnership, Anne does not return to the “old home as Lady Elliot” but rather enters the worlds “of doers and makers” (Shaw 299). In both her suspension of Anne’s marriage plot and the illustration of the Crofts’ marriage, Austen calls for an investigation of the functionality of marriage in rigid traditionalism.

CONCLUSION

While the Austen canon creates a world of tender romances, studying such writing uncovers a world of rich social criticism and complex commentary on mainstream values. As Austen investigates “what lies beneath social surfaces,” she explores the complex world of thought and feelings beneath the body’s surface (Shaw 297). Austen highlights the dually painful and pleasurable experience of the female form under the objectifying male gaze as a vehicle to discuss the greater experience of women within their society. In looking at what deadens and revives the female form, Austen offers her heroine as a microcosm of the feminine experience. While the institutions of Anne’s surrounding world are not inherently confining, Austen exposes the “aspects of the institutions that patently do not serve her heroines well” and allow them to depart from lives of deadening duty (Johnson xxiv).

Austen’s work with *Persuasion* “bespeaks a victory of autonomy” in Anne’s removal from the property of Kellynch Hall and provides her melancholic state an exploratory adventure to observe and interpret the world outside her family estate (Johnson 165). Once removed from the society oppressing her, Anne resketches her past and gains a sense of authority over her future. While the novel does conclude with Anne’s marriage to Wentworth, their route to closure involves “the text’s dismantling those oppositions,” which produce painful confines on women’s autonomy (Warhol 8). The selfishness of Anne’s society uncovers the fearful motivations behind the oppression of the female form.

In recognizing the oppressive agents in the world she inhabits, Anne reclaims agency and narrative life by employing the female gaze and her desirability under the male gaze. She escapes a world of being and enters a “world of doing” (Harris 212). She sheds the passivity that her own

mother once embodied and seizes the life of an autonomous heroine. The dramatic shift in Anne's body from passivity to agency illustrates the significant implications of women's societal autonomy; it holds the power of life and death. Through Austen's criticism and investigation of her Regency society and its governing institutions, she enters into a conversation about woman's autonomy and agency that proves timely for her generation and the modern era. Austen navigates the world of passive victims to patriarchal institutions, asserts the female form's power, and calls for a complementary coexistence of male and female agency. Such ideas inspire broader questions about power dynamics between sexism, gender equality, and bodily autonomy and desire. Perhaps the experience of the female form continues to experience a dually painful and pleasurable existence in relation to the male gaze rather than playing partner to it. While Austen calls forth her heroines from narrative death to life, perhaps she also calls for the reclamation of women within her society.

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